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AUTHOR	Tavalin, Fern; Quinn, Regina; Boke, Nick; Lavigne, Jane
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ABSTRACT

Using the example of Taking a Stand in Cyberspace, the authors articulate issues confronting school, community, and higher education groups as they create online discussions geared to deepen the level of student discourse about literature. Through a collaboration between the Vermont Center for the Book, the WEB Project, and six Vermont schools, middle school students read and discussed three books while teachers maintained an online discussion about the student conversations and the degree to which the student discussions showed evidence of reaching selected learning goals (i.e., reading comprehension, informed decisions, and responding to text). This paper presents the various perspectives of researchers and evaluators, teachers, students, and agency representatives as they work together to improve student online discussions about shared literature. It also gives suggestions for connecting pre-service educators to the circle of participants. (Author/MES)

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Taking a Stand: Developing System-wide Collaborations for Effective Discourse

Fern Tavalin, Director
The WEB Project
University of Vermont Southeast Regional Center
157 Old Guilford Road #4
Brattleboro, VT 05301
tavalin@sover.net

Regina Quinn, Teacher
Walden School
Walden, VT
Regina_Quinn@Cabot.vegs.together.org

Nick Boke, Educational Consultant
Vermont Center for the Book
Chester, VT
nboke@vermontbook.org

Jane Lavigne, Teacher
Edmunds Middle School
Burlington, VT
jlaviems@pop.k12.vt.us

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Abstract: Using the example of Taking a Stand in Cyberspace, we articulate issues confronting school, community, and higher education groups as they create online discussions geared to deepen the level of student discourse about literature. Through a collaboration between the Vermont Center for the Book, the WEB Project, and six Vermont schools, students read and discussed three books while teachers maintained an online discussion about the student conversations and the degree to which the student discussions showed evidence of reaching selected learning goals. This paper presents the various perspectives of researchers and evaluators, teachers, students, and agency representatives as they work together to improve student online discussions about shared literature. It also gives suggestions for connecting pre-service educators to the circle of participants.

Overview

In rural states such as Vermont, it is often difficult to find needed resources in a single community. New educational concepts, new technology, and new subject content require collaboration among those with expertise in these new areas. With the advent of the World Wide Web and the recent technological ease of digitizing images, sounds, movement and text, these collaborations can occur at a distance. In 1995 the US Department of Education provided funds to Vermont schools via the WEB Project, http://www.webproject.org, to build an innovative online network of students, teachers, artists, and community organizations working together to help improve student performance in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Online Arts Mentoring in music composition (Vermont MIDI Project) and visual arts (Art Responding Through Technology - ARTT) formed the first two online initiatives.

Building on current research and the professional lessons learned from five years of arts experiences, The Vermont Center for the Book (http://www.vermontbook.org) and The Web Project

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(http://www.webproject.org) designed Taking a Stand, an online book discussion series among middle school students from several Vermont schools. Last year, students read and discussed three novels dealing with young people who intentionally or inadvertently take a stand on an issue. While students discussed the literature online, teachers engaged in graduate action research studies that examined multiple sources of data to determine whether or not online literature discussions hold promise as a vehicle to improve student analytical skills. Sources of data included an examination of the discussions themselves, surveys, student focus group discussions, classroom observations, and web-based discussions about the student discourse while the program was in operation.

Evolution of the Online Experience -- Two Classroom Views

Learning Outcomes at Edmunds Middle School

Teachers involved with the "Taking A Stand" initiative looked to online dialogue to deepen student discussions and increase student achievement of three specific standards: Reading Comprehension, Informed Decisions, and Responding to Text. In the Edmunds Middle School experience, effective training of students around discussion techniques in the classroom led to better online conversations. Because students had deep discussions in the classroom following a group reading of a text, they were more likely to carry those discussions over into the online forum to which they had been assigned, although talking too much in class served a deterrent to conversing further online.

Reading Comprehension

Because each of the books differed, it was necessary for students to analyze and interpret the features of each text. The first book, *Nothing But the Truth*, generated discussions about the style of the book. Students discussed online whether they found the book reader-friendly or not (it is written like a play, and each chapter shifts from character to character). The need to understand vocabulary relating to apartheid was important to students posting messages about *Beyond Safe Boundaries*. Each book allowed students to make connections between parts of a text, other texts, and experiences in and out of school. There were lots of online discussions about groups and cliques in schools after the reading of *The Chocolate War*. Students went beyond *Beyond Safe Boundaries* to discuss the larger issue of apartheid. They followed links to current events like the dragging death of a black man in Texas. With each book they discussed civil and individual rights. The richness of the topics covered in the "Taking A Stand" books allowed for plenty of opportunities to analyze, interpret, and evaluate texts for their cultural, political, and aesthetic contexts. First amendment rights were debated online after reading *Nothing But the Truth;* racism, classism, and sexism were brought up by students who read *Beyond Safe Boundaries;* and the way students treat each other in school was a focus of discussion following *The Chocolate War* (one can only imagine where that discussion might have gone had students been discussing the book following the recent Colorado murders).

Informed Decisions

Since each of the books in this strand dealt with a controversial topic, there were many opportunities for students to evaluate the consequences of decisions. When no one turned out to be a clear "winner" in any of the books, students discussed how taking a stand was often not easy or neat. They asked each other about characters' motives and authors' purposes. They wondered together about how things might have worked out differently. Through online discussion, students recognized others' points of view and assessed their decisions from others' perspectives. They did this in two ways: first, they discussed how characters in a given book were affected by contrary perspectives. Then, in online discussions, they challenged each other to see the "big" picture. They certainly analyzed and considered alternative decisions. Should Jerry simply have given in and sold the chocolates in *The Chocolate War*? What if Phillip's parents and the media had stayed out of the controversy in *Nothing But the Truth*? If Evie had known how things would turn out, would she have become as involved as she did with the anti-apartheid movement? Especially in *Nothing But the Truth*, students differentiated between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions. Because virtually no one told the complete truth in that story, entire lives were changed. Students wondered about fact vs. opinion in many of their online discussions.

Responding to Text

Students had many opportunities to make inferences about content, events, story, characters, and setting, and the relationships among them. The relationships among these aspects of a text were probably the largest focus of online discussions, although some discrete discussions also occurred. (Interestingly, some students wondered after discussing the three books whether it might not have been a good idea to set up a thread in each discussion area for things like characterization, setting, theme, etc.) The three books shared a common theme, but each was written in a very different style, allowing for much online discussion about themes and styles. Students explored the effects of point of view with each book. In *Nothing But the Truth*, it was precisely because every character had a different point of view that the story turned out as it did. Students compared *Beyond Safe Boundaries* to *To Kill A Mockingbird* in terms of point of view - told by a young girl who was initially oblivious to the racism around her. The omniscient point of view used in *The Chocolate War* was a switch for students; they needed to consider it in their dialogue. The entire focus of the "Taking A Stand" initiative led students to interpret the ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and nuances of each text. Precisely because there are no neat endings to any of the stories, and each book featured several sympathetic characters and extenuating circumstances, the students found them to be more representative of life, with its ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and nuances.

Details of the Online Experience

At Walden School, eighth graders typically spent literacy classes two weeks prior to their time online reading and participating in small-group, Great Books-style discussions, forming and responding to interpretive questions and referring to passages in the text to explain or underscore thoughts, back up opinions, and frame questions. They related issues in the books to their own lives and, in some cases, built background knowledge to gain a greater understanding of the book's context. At the end of that preparatory period, they worked with other students in small groups to select an idea or post a question, based on their class discussions and writing.

As a prelude to their online book discussions, students at the six schools got acquainted through personal introduction threads. This was initially very awkward for Walden students as they sought a way to present themselves in cyberspace to unknown others. This was particularly challenging before students had fully conceptualized the experience of online discussion, confirming what Brent Wilson articulates as he describes some of the dilemmas of engaging students in online learning communities (Wilson 1998). Prior to Taking a Stand, some Walden students had used e-mail, some had done chats, most imagined that communication would be relatively immediate. Few, if any, had experienced asynchronous, threaded discussions and were somewhat taken aback by the time delays. Once students received responses or read other postings, however, their interest and eagerness soared.

Students initially discussed *Nothing But the Truth*. Each school distributed groups of students among three discussion forums so that the volume of responses would be manageable and students would have opportunities to dialogue with small groups of students from each of the other schools. Even with this precautionary organizational structure in place, floods of questions, rudimentary responses, and only occasional examples of complete cycles of dialog characterized the first discussion.

As students reflected on the first book discussion, they recognized the importance of thoughtful responses and sustained dialogue. Informed by their early experiences, many students approached the second book, *Beyond Safe Boundaries*, with greater focus and understanding. These qualitative improvements were also promoted by the students' feelings of indignation and outrage about the injustices experienced by many of the characters in this book about young South Africans taking a stand against apartheid. This helped fuel passion for participating in the discussion as students were personally moved and had a stronger desire to write about the issues raised. A less overwhelming volume of responses online, generally greater focus, and more sustained dialogue resulted.

For the third book, *The Chocolate Wars*, schools were paired for discussions. This restructuring made threads even more manageable, although it left sites more vulnerable to the peculiarities of a single partner-school's computer and Internet access quirks, class trips, and scheduling conflicts. As students participated in their third discussion, incomplete cycles of online communication reduced and students increased their critical responses to other postings. The development of critical response over time stresses the importance of conducting a series of discussions rather than structuring online discussions on a book by book basis.

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Improving the Collaboration in Year Two

In addition to looking at student discourse for evidence of reaching the standards associated with critical analysis and interpretation of text, participants sought to clarify the role of outside agencies in facilitating online conversations. The lessons that emerged from the first year of Taking a Stand through in-house analysis and RMC Research Corporation (Denver, CO) evaluation point toward some simple next steps both for the participating schools and the facilitating organizations as the system becomes refined.

To ensure that collaborations lead to the desired results for all students participating, we emphasize the following lessons:

1. ***Begin with common learning goals AND common methods of teaching.*** Selecting standards is only part of ensuring a common focus; a common approach to teaching is also necessary. In this case, inquiry based learning led to progress toward desired results faster than a traditional "test question/response" approach. Furthermore, an inquiry-based approach to discussions is directly aligned with the learning results and assessment systems that have been established by the network. Revised activities for Year Two include:

    a. online discussions among the schools will last for three weeks per book with a minimization of the amount of in-class discussion that takes place beforehand so as to keep online work fresh with an agreement to print discussions, talk about it in small groups, compose a response offline, then post.
    b. schools will serve as "question hosts" each developing one question about a book, facilitating the conversation, and bringing closure to discussions.
    c. teachers will periodically download transcripts to discuss the quality of the discourse and engage in other metacognitive activities designed to heighten student awareness and understanding of good communication and thinking
    d. summative responses to the literature will be generated by all students, either written or visual

2. ***Model the common approach in-person and online.*** Site analysis reveals that most questions from Taking a Stand fit into the "test question" category, rather than resulting from genuine inquiry. Thus, essential to model for teachers and students what genuine inquiry looks like. Initially, this may take the shape of learned forms of interaction so that students are taught how to hold meaningful inquiry.

2. ***Assess individual and group performance both in-progress and with a final product.*** In Year One of Taking a Stand, designers believed that it was possible to measure all learning goals by assessing discrete parts of the discourse. This approach was not an effective measurement of whether or not students achieved the desired results. As a result, participants have clarified their roles and proposed a four-part assessment schema which includes:

    a. assessment of each post to determine whether students speak with specific reference to text and use literary vocabulary
    b. assessment of the discourse as a whole to see whether the discourse leads to opportunities to learn and exhibit evidence of reading for meaning by using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes
    c. assessment after the online discourse to determine whether or not the experience has led to synthesis of information and generalization to other texts
    d. evaluation of the experience to establish the relationship between student improvement and use of Internet technology

By examining successive posts and dialog episodes, other pieces of evidence from the selected learning goals emerge, such as showing different points of view and multiple interpretations of text. Moreover, when a complete dialog is regarded as evidence of group performance, the assessment system itself embodies a professional level of inquiry that parallels the inquiry behaviors desired from the students.

From a teacher's point of view, student individual postings can be monitored through a simple assessment instrument while the co-facilitating organization, in this case Vermont Center for the Book, looks at the overall dialog for opportunities that explicate the learning goals. In order to assess whether or not the opportunity to learn has indeed resulted in actual student learning, essay exams or similar types of traditional assessments are administered once the online discussions have been finished. Evaluation of survey responses establishes the relationship between student improvement and the online experience.

A Role for Pre-service Education

Because online discourse leaves a record of student performance, rich opportunities exist for pre-service educators to use the Taking a Stand dialogs to examine whether or not the standards addressed in Taking a Stand, or initiatives like it, are exhibited in the student work. The dialogs provide case studies of actual work with the added chance to interact with the participants via e-mail or at the web-based conferencing site. In this particular example, the students will also prepare summative materials. Drafts of essays and digital art pieces in-progress will be placed online for feedback. Pre-service teachers are in a prime position to provide online mentoring as students synthesize what they have learned through online dialog.

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